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ABSTRACT

This conference paper describes how the phrase "picture bride" is used as a metaphor in ethnic poetry. It is used in poems which concern female creativity in the areas of art and housekeeping. The phrase represents the fusion of concepts and ideas which are usually thought of in juxtaposition with each other. These concepts and ideas are the following; (1) female/male; (2) west/east; (3) feminist/sexist; (4) rural/urban; (5) outdoors/indoors; (6) contemporary/historical; (7) liberation/constraint; and (8) experimental/traditional. These contrasts represent the works of two artists who exemplify these ideas in their artworks. The poet weaves together the contrasting perspectives of the two artists by combining their artistic metaphors into verse. For example, the white towel referred to in one of the poems is an allusion to both the skin of powdered women in the painting of one artist and the bleached bones of the desert in a painting of the other. Such ethnic poetry in the United States demonstrates that people whose origins are in the third world remain conscious of those roots. This artistic expression provides a model for enacting cultural pluralism. (VM)

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Picture Bride as a Definition of "Third World" Poetry

The images and literary tradition evoked by the words "picture bride" provide a foil rather than a context for Cathy Song's book, which received the Yale Series of Younger Poets award in 1982. Although she addresses the historical and sociological dimensions of the picture bride experience, her contribution to this subject lies in her exploration of the phenomenon as metaphor. Her poems, all of which concern female creativity in the sphere of art and housekeeping, evolve from a kind of bridal union between two artists, Georgia O'Keeffe and Kitagawa Utamaro, and the contrasts they embody--female/male, west/east, feminist/sexist, rural/urban, outdoors/indoors, contemporary/historical, liberation/constraint, experimental/traditional. By fusing these contrasts, Song's poems create a "third world" that furnishes a paradigm for the realistic practice of pluralism in American society.

O'Keeffe represents physical independence, artistic integrity, and communion with primal energies, as reflected throughout Song's poetry in the image-ideas of aridity and spaciousness. The poem titled "From the White Place," which is dedicated to O'Keeffe and which refers to one of her paintings, acknowledges her sexual independence and creative power. Through relentless exposure to the desert elements, where she becomes "an

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arthritic who cannot sleep,/tormented by bones and joints," and through exposure to Steiglitz's camera, where "she endure[s] the inspections/of her bones and wrists," O'Keeffe develops her own point of view. In this three-part poem, the first presents the desert landscape, the second distinguishes O'Keeffe's self-reflections from Steiglitz's photographs of her, and the third, subtitled "From the White Place," contains the painter's recognition of a new self:

> Out on the pink mesa,
> the soft sandstone glowed
> like the belly of a salmon.
> I began breathing for the first time today,
> knowing the first breath would hurt.

O'Keeffe's individualism and dedication are summarized here through the image-ideas of aridity and spaciousness.

Whereas O'Keeffe's art presents Song with a procedural ideal, Utamaro's art provides a more direct medium to enact the conversion of private, immediate experience into words. The poems referring to his ukiyo-e prints develop the image-ideas of moisture and constraint which comprise the other half of Song's artistic vocabulary and sensibility.

A poem like "Beauty and Sadness" betrays a perception of water beyond what is actually present in the prints referred to. Almost subsuming referential descriptions, such as "the half-draped body/emerging from a bath," are the extended similes which really create the drenched setting:

> Crouching like cats,
> they purred amid the layers of kimono
> swirling around them
> as though they were bathing

in a mountain pool with irises
growing in the silken sunlit water.
Or poised like porcelain vases,
slender, erect and tall; their heavy
brocaded hair was piled high
with sandalwood combs and blossom sprigs
poking out like antennae.
They resembled beautiful iridescent insects,
creatures from a floating world.

Utamaro absorbed these women of Edo
in their moments of melancholy
as well as of beauty.
He captured the wisp of shadows,
the half-draped body
emerging from a bath; whatever
skin was exposed
was powdered white as snow.
A private space disclosed.
Portraying another girl
catching a glimpse of her own vulnerable
face in the mirror, he transposed
the trembling plum lips
like a drop of blood
soaking up the white expanse of paper.

So complete is Song's "water sensibility" that she elicits moisture from conventional images, such as her use of "swirling kimonos," and she re-

translates the term "ukiyo-e" by rendering it visually as a floating world of water insects.

This idiosyncratic translation, however, refers to the same world of traditional female roles. Utamaro depicts women who are defined by relationships to men and who are artfully constructed to give them sensual pleasure. Their fulfillment is achieved through constraint. Like flower arrangements, a traditional Japanese woman is "Petal and leaf/curving like a fan,/the stem snipped and wedged/into the metal base--/to appear like a spontaneous accident." In this poem, constraint is presented as unnatural and repressive, but elsewhere Song suggests its capacity for expression. For instance, the passage--

> The peach-dyed kimono
> patterned with maple leaves
> drifting across the silk,
> falls from right to left
> in a diagonal, revealing
> the nape of her neck
> and the curve of a shoulder
> like the slope of a hill
> set deep in snow in a country
> of huge white solemn birds

--is a rich texture evoked by silence. Searching for the girl's thoughts, the poet can only describe her external self, yet this embroidering of silence is partially, at least, and perhaps even to a large degree, determined by the silent woman's self-composition. This example of constraint as capable of positive expression informs many of Song's poems about women who do not speak with words or whose productivity occurs within a limited sphere.

Song's concern with traditional female roles and a childhood in a rainy farm town that was both joyful and oppressive perhaps led her to see in Utamaro's prints the image-ideas of moisture and constraint. Joined to O'Keeffe's aesthetic of aridity and spaciousness, they generated a vocabulary of fulfillment that could then articulate a world neither Utamaro's nor O'Keeffe's but possessing fundamental affinities with both.

A poem like "Hotel Geneve" affirms that Song's appropriation of the painters proved fruitful. As the adult speaker recalls a trip to Mexico City at age fourteen, desert heat and floating world moisture conjoin in imagery of steam to portray the conversion of life into words. "[C]risp lettucelike trees" and "clean starched sheets/stacked like envelopes or tortillas" were some of the phenomena for which she had no words. But she stored these impressions in a "pristine journal," "fold[ing] secrets into each page/as though [she] were wrapping/jade fish into origami."

Years later, the poet unwraps these phenomena into words. Her perception of "quiet resemblances" between the objects surrounding her then and now, such as between Mexican skirts "with fluted edges,/violet on challis" and the "same blue tint/of the hydrangea in glass" before her on the kitchen table, signifies that she has developed a poet's language of correspondences. A single sentence bridging the last two stanzas of the poem enacts the conversion of Mexico City's rain and sensory experience into the steam, or creative heat, now contained within the poet:

> Those afternoons alone,
> the light shuddered
> translucent upon my skin
> as I eased into the bath.
> The vapor condensed onto the mirror

like the humid windows
of the flower shops we had passed,

like the kitchen window, now
blurred with rain.
Water everywhere
this end of summer.
I breathe in its smell,
of things green and ferny.
Tonight,
I am filled with the steam
my warm body gathered,
wrapping the petals of itself
in a white towel.

The fruitful union of Utamaro and O'Keeffe is signified in the poem's many conversions--of objects into words, of solid into liquid, of cold into hot, of inanimate into animate, of "jade fish" into "things green and ferny." The final conversion of pristine journal into white towel goes still further toward summarizing Song's debt to both artists. It combines the snipped and wired flowers of ikebana with the oversize, brilliantly colored flowers of the O'Keeffe paintings that title the sections of Picture Bride, and the white of Utamaro's soft-skinned, powdered women with the bleached bones and desert vision of O'Keeffe.

Song's fusion of two distinct traditions offers an alternative to choosing between strident ethnicity or vapid universality. If we consider the two poems containing the most ethnic and the most universal language and referents, we can see how Song's "third world" poetics defines ethnicity

as something integrative and complex. The poem "Chinatown" is a catalogue of images--"fish eyes," "yellow tumors," "roach eggs," "Mah-Jongg tiles," "bamboo chopstick tenements," incense, rice, jade, etc.--which, however, is not framed by a clear point of view, and consequently is indistinguishable from stereotypes. Ironically, the most explicitly ethnic of Song's poems clarifies but does not represent her real achievement as an ethnic poet.

"Chinatown" can be contrasted to "The White Porch." Although it appears to be the quintessential "universal" poem, lacking explicit geographical, historical, and cultural markers, "The White Porch" is as deeply informed by ethnicity as most of Song's poems. The pregnant woman's sensual pleasure in her housewifery, fresh-washed hair, swelling body, and anticipation of dinner with her husband, are female roles rejected by O'Keeffe and articulated in Utamaro's prints. The woman's serene submersion in domestic life was prepared for in girlhood as she washed dishes with her mother while "discussing/dresses and pastries," her hair sometimes getting caught in her mother's wedding band. O'Keeffe is present, too, however, in the daughter's open sexuality which contrasts with her mother sleeping "in tight blankets." O'Keeffe's presence is also expressed in the blue towel and the depth of personal freedom and luxury the porch contains. From the porch, life is felt as a "slow arousal," not just the child growing within her like "swollen magnolias/heavy as a flock of birds/in the tree," but the sponge cake "rising in the oven," which her husband will eat drenched with canned peaches. These images of fruition, heat, and blossoming reveal O'Keeffe's presence in their creation of a spacious, plentiful world.

The white porch is a "white place," or the symbolic location of O'Keeffe's birth as an artist. It is also the residence of Utamaro's women.

Like ukiyo-e images of white skin, which Song calls "a private space disclosed," her white porch leads in to the complex inner life of a woman. What at first appears confining is shown to contain powerful productivity and creativity. Finally, the white porch is also mother's house repossessed by a grown daughter. The full meaning of the poem is thus dependent on Song's relation to O'Keeffe, to Utamaro, and to her mother as presented in the network of poems comprising the book. The ethnicity expressed in "The White Porch" is contained in the poem but cannot be apprehended without reference to other poems, or without undertaking the same fusion of cultural traditions the poet undertook to acquire her vision and language.

This poem, and Picture Bride in general, are thus a paradigm of American ethnic literature and society. To be self-consciously ethnic American is to recognize that one's community and personal history are a third world. Picture Bride gives us access to one such specific world and a model for enacting cultural pluralism.